

# Life Step uses education to break cycle of teen pregnancy

By Teresa A. Parsons

Shirley Maloney-Smith sees a blueprint of her future around her when she gathers a group of teenagers to talk about sexuality.

She puts her heart and all her street sense into presentations that contradict the sexual connotations and stereotypes society flings at today's teenagers, in part because she and her own children have to live in the world those young people will help create.

"Your body is a castle," she tells them. "Don't let just anybody in to steal everything."

Maloney-Smith is project coordinator for Life Step, a dual program that aims, on one hand, to prevent teen pregnancy through comprehensive family education, and on the other to assist teenagers who are already parents with the skills and services they need.

Life Step offers workshops and counseling not only on sexuality, but also on communications skills, self-esteem, parenting, career skills and almost any other topic parents or teenagers request.

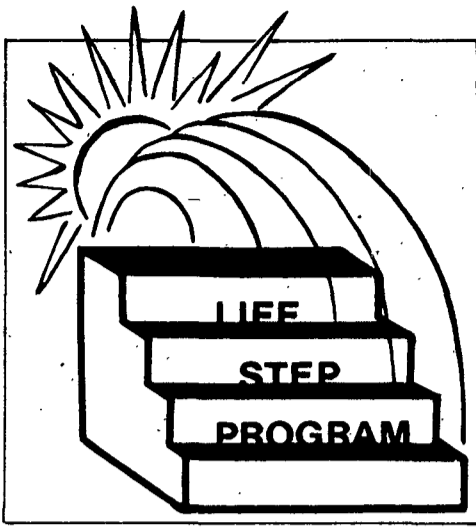
Funded last July by a grant from the New York State Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention and Services Program, Life Step's local sponsors are Action for a Better Community, Catholic Family Center and Ibero American Action League.

"By combining services, we are able to deal with the total person," Maloney-Smith said. And with support from three such diverse agencies, Life Step's programs have a nearly unprecedented range of expertise, contacts and credibility upon which to draw. "It takes a lot of meetings," she said, "but we're all working on the same goal."

Cultural differences make all the difference in whether counselors are effective at helping adolescents and adults talk about sexuality, according to Maloney-Smith.

"When you're talking to a black or Hispanic group, they're watching to see if you are empathizing. With a white group, they want to see you writing things down; otherwise you're not listening," she explained. "Blacks and Hispanics deal on a feeling level. If they get a good feeling from you, then they will trust what you say. If you use a lot of statistics, you'll lose them."

Parenting styles also vary with culture. "In the black community, for instance, tanning a child's hide after giving him a couple of chances wouldn't be unusual," Maloney-Smith



said. "In the white community, that might be considered child abuse."

Regardless of race or culture, Life Step staff members stress that parents can no longer wait till their children are 12 or even 10 to talk about sex. "With each generation, girls' menstrual cycles are starting two to three years earlier," Maloney-Smith said. "Teen-parents are nothing new, but we're no longer just getting teens—it's preteens as young as 8 or 9."

Male participants, on the other hand, tend to be as much as 10 to 15 years older and are much more difficult to attract to programs. "Attracting young males to programs is really tough. You have to be able to offer them something, like job skills," she said. "Females are a lot more comfortable talking about feelings."

Life Step takes referrals from almost any source — teachers, pastors, parents and relatives, friends and other community agencies. Staff members invite siblings of teenage girls who are already pregnant or parents to workshops.

Sometimes, girls whose boyfriends are pressuring them to have sex may attend a workshop based only on advice from a friend.

"Once teens put the word out that this is a person you can trust, that means a lot," Maloney-Smith said. "Teens are best at reaching teens."

Life Step workshops are adapted from the family-life curriculum developed by the Monroe County Teen Pregnancy Coalition for junior high students in Rochester's city schools.

They focus on building self-esteem, setting lifetime goals, respecting family values and encouraging communications.

Rather than duplicating such direct services as child care or job training, Life Step refers clients to other agencies to develop new programs. Maloney-Smith also works with other agencies to develop new programs. Currently, she is cooperating with Big Brother/Big Sister on a pilot program to provide teenage parents with mentors—adults who help them learn how to play with their children and enjoy recreational activities.

Even the adult parents who attend Life Step programs often seem overwhelmed by their children. "A lot of them were teen parents themselves who didn't complete their own learning," Maloney-Smith said.

Consequently, they don't know what to expect from their children or from themselves. Having never learned parenting and survival skills like cooking or sewing, they don't pass them along. "Some of these kids can't even boil an egg," she observed.

When parents feel helpless and inadequate, they often forget to show their children affection and ignore their obvious distress signals. "Parents don't ask where their children are going at night because it's easier when they're

gone," Maloney-Smith said. "They can look at TV without fighting over what program to watch. They can relax."

Among social-service workers concerned about preventing teen pregnancies, there are many who believe that such families are incapable of supporting and educating their children about sex. For some teens, they say, contraceptives are the only realistic alternative.

Maloney-Smith conceded that a single approach will not work for everyone. "I'm not minimizing the need for contraceptives for some children, but I think we also need to look at other resources — at belief in God, at the family, at their values," she said.

Her own beliefs were what brought Maloney-Smith to Life Step from an unlikely direction. Previously, she worked as a counselor for Planned Parenthood. Through that job, she became involved with the Monroe County Teen Pregnancy Coalition during the period when it was developing and screening proposals for the state grant. When Life Step was chosen for funding, Maloney-Smith applied for the project coordinator's job.

"I come from a family of ministers, and religion is a very, very strong part of my life," she

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